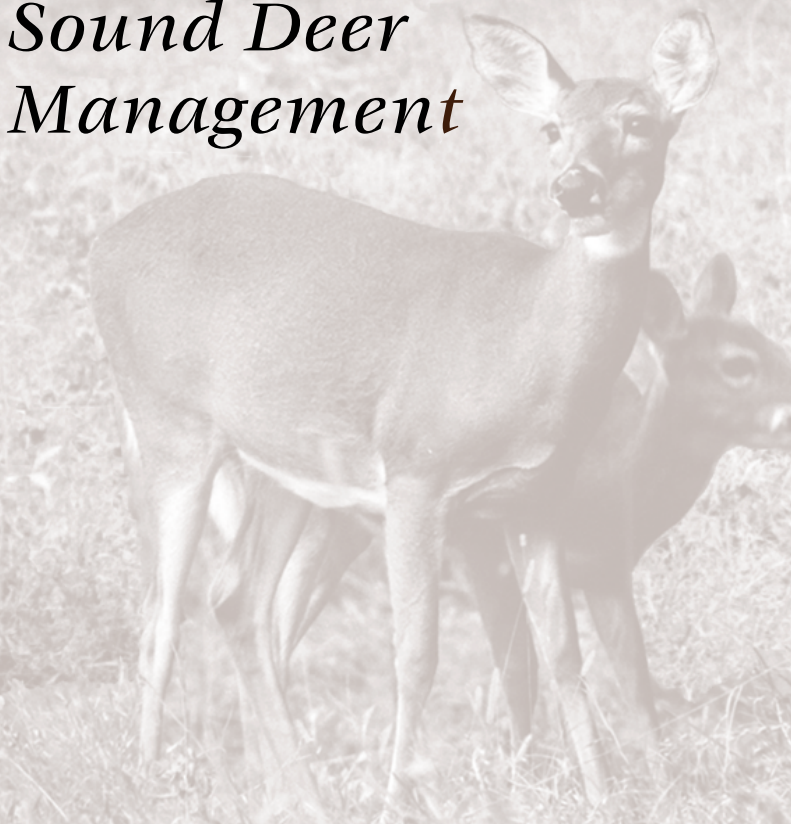


Doe Harvest

An Essential For

Sound Deer

Management



South Carolina Department
of Natural Resources

Introduction

In 1963 the S.C. Department of Natural Resources formerly S.C. Wildlife and Marine Resources Department authorized the legal harvest of doe deer in three low country counties. Many concerned hunters told wildlife biologists they were crazy and that the deer herd would be gone in five years. Three decades later, these disbelievers have been proven wrong. Between 1923, when the bucks-only law was passed, and 1963, no legal harvest of doe deer had taken place. Biologists at that time recognized the need to initiate doe harvests to keep deer populations within limits that the habitats could support. Today, under certain conditions, hunters in every county of the state can take female deer.

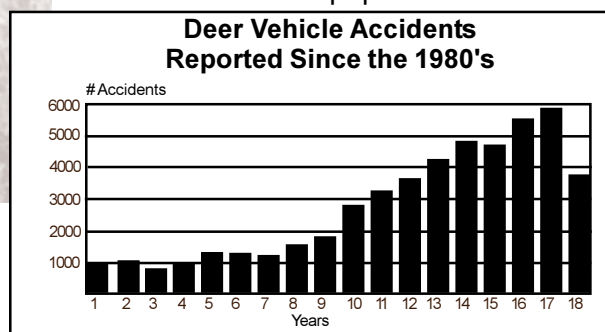
Recently does comprised 48 percent of the total reported statewide harvest. In the 28 county coastal plain region, the need for doe harvest arose sooner, and hunters there continue an excellent job of attaining doe harvest recommendations. Does generally comprise 52 percent of this area's reported harvest.

Benefits

South Carolina's deer herd provides recreation for approximately 190,000 deer hunters who spend approximately 4 million person days each year hunting. Countless other individuals spend recreational time observing in woods and fields around the state. These recreational activities provide a good escape from today's hectic pace; as well as providing millions of dollars for the state's economy. A 1996 survey by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service indicated that deer hunters alone had a minimum economic impact of over \$190 million in South Carolina. Further, when economic multipliers are factored in, the impact of deer hunting in the Palmetto State is approximately \$350 million.

Deer Problems

The "social cost" of South Carolina's deer herd has grown substantially over the past two decades. Deer vehicle accidents have grown from a minimum of 592 in 1975 to a high of over 5,000 in recent years, an increase of more than 900 percent (Fig. 1). Although there has not been a corresponding ninefold increase in the deer herd, there has been a substantial increase in vehicle miles and miles of roadways. As South Carolina continues to develop, traffic will increase. Deer-vehicle accidents could increase even with a decrease in the state's deer population.

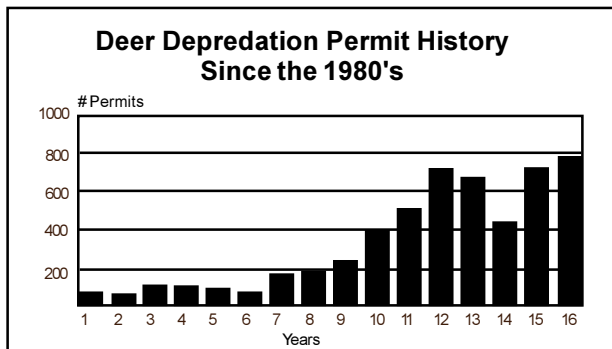


Farmers also report substantial deer damage to crops. The number of deer depredation permits (shoot-to-kill) issued by the SCDNR has increased from 68 in 1982 to over 800 in recent years (Fig. 2). This represents an increase of over 1000 percent. Again, this problem is not due solely to a change in the deer population. Over the past 15 years the acreage of soybeans has declined by 60 percent while the total acreage of summer row crops has suffered similar declines.

Deer damage is not restricted to farms. Homeowners in remote areas, and even in urban areas adjacent to woodlands or croplands, report damage to shrubbery, gardens and yard plantings.

Natural vs. Social Carrying Capacity

Wildlife biologists define the “natural carrying capacity” as the number of healthy animals a habitat can support over a long period of time. A more recent term, “social carrying capacity” is defined as the number of animals humans will tolerate in habitats



around their homes or farms. In some areas, the social carrying capacity may be well below the natural carrying capacity. That is, non-hunters are not interested in high deer densities and the potential associated problems.

Varying Perspectives

The biological aspects of white-tailed deer management are relatively straightforward; however, the social aspects of that management present a growing challenge to modern deer managers. “Deer” means different things to different people. The hunter sees a magnificent game animal, the farmer sees a threat to crops and the motorist on South Carolina’s highways sees a potential threat to life and property.

Unlike other wildlife species, deer have benefited from many of the changes society has made to the landscape. This species, more than most, requires a significant annual harvest. A major portion of this harvest must be female deer to keep whitetail numbers under control.

The Challenge

Today’s deer hunter is increasingly aware of the need for habitat and harvest management. The harvest will require a greater percentage of does each year until the deer management needs of each community are met. The social carrying capacity of future deer habitats may be well below the management objectives of deer hunters. However, these hunters should realize that they comprise less than ten percent of South Carolina’s human population.

South Carolina’s deer herd is a wildlife management success. The general absence of deer at the turn of the century contrasts sharply to the estimated 1 million deer today. Our responsibility to this resource, as well as to other interests, requires that we stabilize or reduce deer herds in many areas. This will require additional doe harvests.

The harvest recommendations of wildlife biologists should be followed closely. Deer hunters and managers must take a “community” approach to deer management. Tracts of land are often relatively small

and located such that several clubs or groups must make a cooperative effort in order to take enough deer. The combined harvest of the groups in an area can have a significant impact upon local deer herds. Further, hunters must assess the land management objectives of the landowners and residents of the area(s) they hunt. Non-resident hunters should be particularly sensitive to the needs of local citizens.

The benefits of such a strategy extend not only to the citizens of local areas and to the deer hunter, but to the deer herd as well. Many local deer herds have suffered chronic declines in physical condition due to relatively high deer densities. Individual deer condition may never be restored to historic levels; however, the herd health can be improved through substantial doe harvest.

Many hunting clubs have chosen to selectively harvest bucks hoping to increase the number of older, larger antlered individuals. The potential for success in these situations depends to a large extent upon a substantial harvest of doe deer. Bucks that are passed up will then not be required to compete extensively with large numbers of other deer.

Resource agencies, such as the SCDNR, have used the hunting population as its work force to effectively manage many natural resources of this country. The future success of these efforts depends to a great extent upon the willingness of hunters to implement resource agencies’ recommendations. In South Carolina hunters must move beyond recreation in some situations and “work” to harvest enough deer. In situations where small groups of hunters have leased large tracts of land, they must take enough deer or allow other hunters access so that the overall harvest is adequate.

Other citizens (farmers, travelers, homeowners, etc.) are watching resource agencies and hunters to determine if the management of local deer herds is in the best interest of all citizens. Increased doe harvests may help convince our society that this is the case. South Carolina’s white-tailed deer and those who pursue them will be the ultimate beneficiaries.

Written by
Charles Ruth, Deer Project Supervisor
Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries Division
South Carolina Department
of Natural Resources



DNR

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, disability, religion or age. Direct all inquiries to the Office of Human Resources, P.O. Box 167, Columbia, SC 29202.

98WL2350